The Role of Culture in English Language Learning in American Universities

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Abstract: Due to globalization and the increase in the number of international students, learning English in American universities has become increasingly important. However, the role of culture in language learning is often overlooked, and cultural differences can lead to communication breakdowns and misunderstandings. Language learning should not be limited to just vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. Understanding the role of culture in language learning is equally important, as it helps to overcome cultural barriers, promote cross-cultural communication, and improve communication skills. This paper aims to explore the significance of understanding culture in English language learning in American universities. This paper uses a documentary analysis method, a review, and a summary of the collected materials. This thesis found that the role of culture plays a large role in English language learning in American universities and that students' own native culture and the native culture of American universities have a reciprocal effect on their learning and understanding of English in a new environment.

Keywords: culture, English learning, language, teaching

1. Introduction

Culture can be defined as the shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts of a group or society. It encompasses everything from the way people communicate, dress, eat, and celebrate to their religious beliefs, social norms, and political systems. Culture is learned through socialization and is often passed down from one generation to another through language and other forms of communication. English is the most widely used language in the world and is the language of international communication. According to the renowned linguist David Crystal, "English is the medium of a great deal of the world's knowledge, especially in such areas as science and technology." [1] American universities attract students from all over the world, and English language proficiency is crucial for their academic success and career opportunities. English learning in American universities provides international students with the skills and confidence to communicate effectively in academic and professional environments. Language and culture are interrelated, and understanding the role of culture in language learning is essential for effective communication. Language is not only a means of communication but also a reflection of culture. Culture influences people's communication styles, and cultural norms and expectations vary greatly in different societies. Therefore, language learning should not be limited to just vocabulary,

grammar, and syntax. Understanding the role of culture in language learning can help to overcome cultural barriers, promote cross-cultural communication, and improve communication skills.

This paper first defines culture and discusses the importance of English language learning in American universities. Then it discusses the role of culture in English learning, including the relationship between language and culture, communication practices in specific cultures, cultural norms and expectations, and cultural barriers and challenges. Finally, the paper provides strategies for incorporating culture into English language learning, including cultural immersion programs, cross-cultural communication projects, cross-cultural competency training, and incorporating cultural content into language courses. The article concludes by summarizing the importance of culture in English learning and making recommendations for future impact. The significance of this paper lies in its exploration of the relationship between culture and language learning, particularly in the context of English language learning in American universities. By emphasizing the importance of cultural understanding in effective communication and providing practical strategies for incorporating cultural content into language courses, this paper provides valuable insights for educators, language learners, and policy makers. This paper can serve as a reference for future research on related research topics, providing a framework for further exploration of the complex relationship between culture and language learning.

2.   Definition of Culture

Culture plays a critical role in English language learning because it is closely linked to the use and understanding of language. Language reflects cultural values, beliefs, and practices, and cultural norms and expectations influence how people communicate. At universities in the United States, students from different cultural backgrounds come together to learn English as a second language (ESL) or to improve their English language skills. Cultural differences among these students can affect their language learning process because their language use is influenced by their cultural values, customs, and beliefs.

3.   Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in cross-cultural situations is called intercultural communicative competence (ICC) in English language learning. ICC includes the ability to understand and appreciate cultural differences, adapt to different communication styles, and negotiate meaning in cross-cultural communication. It involves not only language proficiency but also cultural competence. According to Sue and Sue, cultural competence is "the awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to function effectively with culturally diverse populations." [2] In American universities, cultural competence is crucial for ESL students to interact with American students and teachers. Cultural competence helps ESL students to understand cultural differences and appreciate diversity. By developing cultural competence, English language learners can gain a deeper understanding of the language, its idioms, and colloquialisms, and use it more effectively in real-life situations. Cultural competence can also help learners to avoid misunderstandings and communication breakdowns, which is particularly important for international students who may come from vastly different cultural backgrounds. Additionally, developing cultural competence in English language learning can help learners to appreciate cultural and viewpoint diversity, resulting in a more inclusive and respectful learning environment.

One way that culture influences English language learning is through the use of idioms and colloquialisms. These are expressions that are specific to a culture and are not easily translated into other languages. These idioms have different meanings from their literal definitions in the cultural context where they are used. These expressions can be a challenge for ESL students as they are

frequently used in everyday English conversations and deeply rooted in the culture and history of English-speaking countries. This makes it necessary for English learners to master the knowledge of idiomatic expressions to communicate effectively in English. For example, the English idiom expression "it's raining cats and dogs" which means raining heavily does not have a direct translation in other languages, and its meaning can only be understood through an understanding of English culture.

4.   Cultural Differences

Finally, cultural differences can have a significant impact on English language learning in terms of the content and context of language use in American universities. The United States is a culturally diverse country, and each culture has its own unique way of using and understanding language. The cultural dimension is evident to English language learners. The cultural dimension refers to the different aspects of culture in different societies. According to the six cultural dimensions theory of Hofstede's study, It can include individualism versus collectivism, high-context versus low-context communication, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity versus femininity [3]. So when non-native speakers enter American universities, they often encounter new dimensions, and these can affect their ability to learn English effectively. For example, in some cultures, indirect communication is preferred, while in others, direct communication is valued. This difference can be evident in the process of language communication. English language learners may have difficulty understanding the expectations and norms of their American professors and classmates, leading to misunderstandings or confusion. In addition, cultural differences in learning styles can affect language learning. Some cultures value rote memorization and repetition, while others emphasize critical thinking and analysis. These differences can affect the way English language learners approach assignments and courses, which in turn can affect their language learning. Therefore, learning English well means not only that we need to master the basic skills of the English language, "it means learning also to see the world as native speakers see it, learning the ways in which their language reflects the ideas, customs, and behavior of their society, learning to understand their 'language of the mind'" [4].

Therefore, culture is very important to the learning of English language learners attending American universities. The above analysis also reveals that difficulties in cross-cultural communication due to cultural differences can present a number of barriers and challenges to English language learners, which may include language barriers, differences in communication styles, different cultural values and beliefs, and misunderstandings due to cultural norms and expectations. Educators need to develop strategies to overcome them and promote effective communication in cross-cultural contexts. Four implementable strategies are presented below.

5.   Strategies for Integrating Culture into English Language Learning

5.1. Culturally Immersive Programs

Culturally immersive programs provide international students with the opportunity to immerse themselves in the target language and culture by experiencing a new culture firsthand through living, studying, and interacting with the local community. American universities typically offer culturally immersive programs as part of their study abroad programs, allowing students to gain a deeper understanding of the culture and language of the country they are visiting. These programs vary in length and format, ranging from short-term experiences to full semesters or academic years spent overseas. In addition to coursework, culturally immersive programs often include activities such as homestays, language classes, cultural events, and volunteer work, all aimed at helping students gain a deeper understanding of the host country's culture. In an interview with Inês Pereira, who

participated in a cultural immersion exchange program in Tallinn, Estonia, she said "The immersion - while initially a complete shock to her system - transformed her from an apprehensive and fearful traveler into a confident and comfortable citizen of the world" [5]. Immersing oneself in a new culture gives one courage and learns independence in the process.

Overall, culturally immersive programs are an important aspect of American university education, providing students with a unique opportunity to broaden their worldview and develop cross-cultural competencies.

5.2. Cross-cultural Exchange Programs

Cross-cultural exchange programs provide opportunities for students from different cultural backgrounds to interact and learn from one another. These programs can include language exchange programs, student exchange programs, and international student organizations. Cross-cultural exchange programs can help develop cross-cultural competencies and promote cross-cultural understanding. They provide students with the skills and knowledge to communicate effectively in a cross-cultural context. American universities often offer cross-cultural exchange programs that allow students from different regions of the world to come together and learn from one another. These programs can take many forms, from short-term cultural exchange programs to full degree programs, and may involve academic coursework and cultural immersion experiences. The goal of these programs is to promote cross-cultural understanding and provide students with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate an increasingly interconnected world.

5.3. Incorporating Cultural Content into Language Courses

Incorporating cultural content into language courses is an important aspect of language learning as it helps promote cultural awareness and understanding among language learners. Cortazzi and Jin identified three cultures - target culture, source culture, and international culture - as cultural messages that could be represented in language classes [6]. Incorporating these three cultures into the content can create positive attitudes toward American universities and English language learning, and incorporating the source culture can in turn help students develop a positive cultural identity. The incorporation of international cultures allows students to focus on more global topics. American universities often incorporate cultural content into their English language courses through various methods, such as reading, movies and discussions, as well as experiential learning activities such as cultural excursions and community service projects. By exposing students to different cultures and perspectives, these courses help develop students' cross-cultural competencies, communication skills, and critical thinking abilities.

5.4. Cross-cultural Competency Training

Cross-cultural competency training is a process of learning and developing the necessary skills, attitudes, and knowledge to communicate and interact effectively with people from different cultures. McAllister and Irvine summarize three different models of intercultural development, They include Helms's Racial Identity Theory, Banks's Typology of Ethnicity, and Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. Teachers can learn to use these models in different contexts to increase their understanding of how people change their behaviors and attitudes toward their own and others' cultural existence [7]. In American universities, cross-cultural competency training is often integrated into coursework to prepare students for the diverse and multicultural societies they will encounter in their future careers. These training programs often include various activities, such as workshops, language classes, cultural immersion experiences, and discussions on cultural differences and similarities. The goal of these programs is

to help students gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of other cultures, build empathy and respect, and develop the skills necessary to effectively navigate different cultural backgrounds in their personal and professional lives.

In summary, the role of culture in English language learning is an important aspect of American university education. By implementing various strategies for incorporating cultural content into English language learning, language learners make significant progress in both language and cultural proficiency. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, students must have the necessary tools and knowledge to navigate different cultures and effectively communicate across language and cultural boundaries.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explored the influence of culture on English language learning in American universities and the relationship between the two. It has been seen that culture plays a crucial role in effective communication and that language learners must understand the cultural context in which they are communicating. This paper also provides insights into the importance of cultural immersion programs, cross-cultural communication programs, and cross-cultural competency training for language learners. However, there is still room for improvement in this paper, such as further exploration of the impact of cultural immersion programs and cross-cultural communication programs on language learning outcomes or research analyzing real cases. Future research could also focus on the role of culture in other aspects of language learning, such as pronunciation and pragmatics.

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